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Elizabeth A. Bates

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# “Walking On Egg Shells”: A Qualitative Examination of Men’s Experiences of Intimate Partner Violence

Elizabeth A. Bates  
University of Cumbria

Research has demonstrated the prevalence of men’s victimization in intimate relationships (Archer, 2000; Bates, Graham-Kevan, & Archer, 2014), but little research has explored these experiences in a non-help-seeking sample. The aim of this study was to qualitatively explore men’s experience of intimate partner violence from their female partners. An online questionnaire was utilized with a series of open-ended questions that explored experiences of verbal, physical, and sexual aggression, as well as different aspects of coercive controlling behavior. Results revealed that the men within this sample experienced a range of aggression that was both severe and injurious at times; however, their most impactful experiences were from the control their female partners exerted over them. This included gaslighting, isolating from friends and family, control over basic freedom, and the fear or uncertainty of living with the abuse in day-to-day life. Findings are discussed in line with men’s help-seeking behavior, and current policy and practice.

### **Public Significance Statement**

This paper is of public significance because it highlights that men experience intimate partner violence at serious and significant rates. Specifically, it contributes new understandings about this vulnerable group and their experience of coercive control in particular.

*Keywords:* intimate partner violence, male victims, coercive control, psychological aggression, physical aggression

Much of the early research within the area of intimate partner violence (IPV), and a view that continues to be influential in terms of public policy, is a “gendered” model, which is associated with feminist analyses (Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 2004; Fagan & Browne, 1994; Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 2003). As a model, it posits that men’s IPV is motivated by the desire to control and dominate women and that this is rooted in a historical and socially constructed patriarchal control. By constructing IPV in this way there is a suggestion that a patriarchal society is supportive of men’s use of violence (Pagelow, 1984), that it should not be studied in the context of family violence or other aggression (Browne, 1987), and that women’s violence is almost exclusively self-defensive (Saunders, 1988). More recently, researchers have attempted to reconceptualize the theory to capture a third-wave feminist, intersectional, and antioppressive stance (George & Stith, 2014); however, others maintain the influence of patriarchy as the most influential factor (DeKeseredy, 2011; Hunnicutt, 2009), and indeed, this is still an explanation that can be seen in intervention models (see Bates, Graham-Kevan, Bolam, & Thornton, 2017 for full discussion).

Alternative approaches to studying IPV (often known by some as the “Family Violence” approach) include looking at it in the context of other family violence and general aggression models (Felson, 2002). Family violence approaches tend to utilize different methods and samples (Archer, 2000) and have been key in developing our understanding of the prevalence of the issue in community settings (as opposed to clinical or treatment samples), as well as highlighting previously overlooked victim groups.

The development of the Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS; Straus, 1979) was the first tool to highlight the prevalence of men’s victimization. Studies that have utilized this self-report measure have demonstrated that men and women are equally as likely to be aggressive in the context of intimate relationships (Archer, 2000; Bates & Graham-Kevan, 2016). Other research (Langhinrichsen-Rohling, Misra, Selwyn, & Rohling, 2012) has demonstrated that bidirectional violence is the most common pattern of aggression found within relationships where there is the presence of IPV. Furthermore, in studies that have examined which partner hit out first (Stets & Straus, 1989) findings suggest that not only is the violence mutual in severity but also women more often than men are the instigators of the aggression. While proponents of the gendered model of IPV would hold that women’s violence occurs overwhelmingly in self-defense (e.g., Yllo, 1993), this body of research presents compelling evidence of women’s IPV perpetration, as well as men’s victimization.

In comparison to the literature available on the prevalence, experiences and outcomes of women’s victimization, there is rel-

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elizabeth A. Bates, Department of Health, Psychology and Social Studies, University of Cumbria, Fusehill Street Campus, Carlisle CA12HH, United Kingdom. E-mail: elizabeth.bates@cumbria.ac.uk

actively limited research currently available on male victims; that which does is largely based in the United States. For example, Hines, Brown, and Dunning (2007) analyzed 190 male callers to the Domestic Abuse Helpline for Men, a national helpline for abused men in the United States and found that all of the callers experienced physical abuse; the most common types included being slapped/hit, pushed, kicked, grabbed, punched, and choked. Similarly, in the Netherlands Drijber, Reijnders, and Ceelen (2013) found the most common forms were hitting, stabbing with an object, kicking, biting, seizing the throat, and scratching. Due to differences in size and strength, and the fact women are more frequently injured by these acts (Archer, 2000), there is a perception that men are often not seriously hurt by the physical aggression they experience. Yet Drijber et al. (2013) found that in 54% of cases where there was physical aggression, there was an object used (e.g., knife, vase, or chair) that will significantly increase the risk for injury and go some way to compensating for the fact women are not typically as physically strong as men. Indeed, Hines and Douglas (2010a) found that 80% of their help-seeking sample reported they were injured by their female partners, with 35.1% reporting they sustained a serious injury (e.g., a broken bone).

The literature also details the impact of IPV including the outcomes for male victims; these studies have demonstrated significantly poorer health symptoms (Hines & Douglas, 2016a): associations with personality and personality disorders (Hines & Saudino, 2008) and associations with posttraumatic stress disorder (Hines & Douglas, 2011). All of these studies have suggested that men suffer psychological and physical effects of IPV victimization, but much of the research has focused on comparing abused men with abused women and concluding that they do not suffer to the same degree (Hines & Douglas, 2009). Men are more likely to externalize their behavior (e.g., by using alcohol and drugs) and women to internalize theirs (Afifi et al., 2009); women experience these internalized symptoms at nearly twice the rate as men in the wider populations (Hines & Douglas, 2009), so it makes these comparisons unsuitable.

There has previously been a tendency within the IPV literature (both on men's and women's victimization) to focus on the physical aggression, at the cost of a lesser understanding of other forms of abuse that are often more prevalent (Straight, Harper, & Arias, 2003). More recently there has been more of a focus on coercive control, emotional aggression, psychological aggression, and controlling behavior, which are overlapping terms used to describe some nonphysical form of aggression and abuse. The interchangeable use of these aforementioned terms has been an issue and has likely contributed to the varying statistics; one systematic review concluded it is the most common form of IPV but that the range in prevalence figures likely represents that they are not necessarily all measuring the same construct (Carney & Barner, 2012). Although some argue that these terms are not synonymous (O'Hagan, 1995), there are indeed common themes across all definitions. For the purposes of the current study, the term coercive control will be utilized, as it is the one currently used in U.K. legislation (Section 76 of the Serious Crime Act, 2015, Crown Prosecution Service [CPS], 2017); it represents a range of nonphysical abusive behaviors that include economic deprivation, possessive and jealous behavior, insults and name calling, threats and intimidation, degradation and isolation, control over basic freedom and everyday

activities, humiliation, and manipulation (Follingstad & DeHart, 2000; Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2005). These behaviors represent a range of acts "designed to make a person subordinate and/or dependent by isolating them from sources of support, exploiting their resources and capacities for personal gain, depriving them of the means needed for independence, resistance and escape and regulating their everyday behavior" (CPS, 2017).

As a form of abuse, coercive control is the most prevalent (Panuzio & DiLillo, 2010), and it is seen as the foundation of the gendered model of IPV. Coercive control in this model is of social and historical construction and originates in the unequal power structures in society and men's use of their male privilege (Dobash & Dobash, 1979). Consequently, much of the early research on this type of abuse has focused on female victimization; for example, Follingstad, Rutledge, Berg, Hause, and Polek (1990) found that 99% of women in a self-identified victim group had experienced emotional abuse within their violent relationships. Similarly, research has explored the distinction between different clusters of psychological aggression (Marshall, 1996), the distinction between overt and subtle types of behavior (Marshall, 1999), and the development of measurement tools to capture the wide range of manifestations of this behavior (Shepard & Campbell, 1992).

Although coercive control and physical aggression will often co-occur, it is thought that the nonphysical and more emotional/psychological aspects are likely to have a more negative impact. Psychological aggression has been linked to negative health perceptions and cognitive impairments (Straight et al., 2003) and has been found to be a unique significant predictor of posttraumatic stress disorder symptomology (Street & Arias, 2001), but in addition, when compared with physical abuse, it has been found to be a stronger predictor of fear (Sackett & Saunders, 1999) and to have a more severe impact (Follingstad et al., 1990).

Coercive control (and named variations) is often perpetrated at similar rates by men and women when explored in representative samples (Bates et al., 2014; Carney & Barner, 2012); for example Black et al. (2011) found 48.4% women and 48.8% of men reported experiences of psychological aggression within their lifetime. Yet, despite the findings around gender parity in experiences, there is still a strong focus on female victimization (Rodríguez-Carballeira, Porrúa-García, Escartín, Martín-Peña, & Almendros, 2014) or male perpetration only (Kachadourian et al., 2013).

The few studies that have focused on men's victimization have highlighted some similarity in the types of behaviors seen in female samples. For example, Drijber et al. (2013) found men experienced bullying, threats, and blackmail, as well as financial harm, in their abusive relationships. Hines et al. (2007) found the most common reported acts of control included emotional abuse, threats and intimidation, manipulating the services and legal system, and denying the abuse. Whereas there are some experiences that are thought to be unique to men's victimization, Tilbrook, Allan, and Dear (2010) described legal and administrative aggression as one partner manipulating legal and other administrative systems in a way that is harmful to their partner; men fall more frequently victim to this due to the gendered perceptions and stereotypes that society, and specifically service providers, have about the nature of IPV. This notion is supported by other findings; for example, Hines et al. (2007) found 50.3% of their sample reported their female partners were using these legal and administrative systems in some way. Although much less understood

than other forms of coercive control, there is still evidence that this is something men report experiencing more often than perpetrating (Hines, Douglas, & Berger, 2015), and has a detrimental impact on men's (and their children's) health outcomes (Berger, Douglas, & Hines, 2016). Indeed, when this is coupled with issues around the visibility of men's services, it adds to the barriers that men experience in their help-seeking. Effective service responses are often critical in helping victims have the confidence to leave an abusive relationship (Waldrop & Resick, 2004), but with a lack of awareness of available services, or those services not being effective (Tsui, 2014), it often means men are coping with their abuse alone and in isolation.

Although we now know more about men's experiences of IPV, there are still significant gaps in our understanding in terms of their broader victimization, but specifically their experiences of coercive control. The current literature has tended to rely on help-seeking samples (e.g., those who have sought help and support from police, IPV organizations, health services, or national helplines; Hines et al., 2007), those self-identifying as victims of IPV (Hogan, 2016), or on interview-based methods (Nybergh, Enander, & Krantz, 2016). These studies have provided a good insight into men's experiences of IPV, but they are self-selecting in that they require men to have either identified as a victim, attempted to seek help, or be in a position that means they feel comfortable talking face-to-face about their abuse. For many men, they do not identify as victims because of the societal discourse around IPV meaning men are seen as perpetrators and women are victims (Machado, Hines, & Matos, 2016). Furthermore, some men struggle to talk about their experiences through feelings of shame or the fear of not being believed (Drijber et al., 2013); indeed, the ManKind Initiative (a U.K. charity that supports male victims of IPV) found that 71% of their callers would not have made the call if the helpline was not anonymous (Brooks, 2018). There is a need for research that explores men's experience in a way that captures a broader range of experience for us to fully understand the needs of this group.

The aim of the current study was to qualitatively explore men's experiences of IPV within a relationship with a female partner, from a family violence perspective; this included verbal, physical and sexual aggression, and coercive control. To address some of the gaps in the literature, this study utilized an anonymous, online, qualitative survey that was advertised as being for any man who had experienced aggression and control from their female partner, with a purposeful avoidance of using terms such as "victim" and "domestic violence." It was hoped that the anonymity, coupled with the broader recruitment strategy, might enable a wider scope of men's experiences to be captured, and that the findings will provide a context for understanding the severity and impact it has on men with the hope of informing service provision.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

The questionnaire was advertised and shared online utilizing social media (e.g., Twitter and Facebook) and through organizations that are known to work with male victims of IPV (e.g., Mankind Initiative) who advertised it on their websites. The aim was to largely recruit U.K.-based men to take part, but the study

was shared quite widely online, so the demographic was wider than originally expected. There was a total of 161 men who completed the online questionnaire; the age range was 20 to 82 years ( $M = 44$ ;  $SD = 10.62$ ). The majority of participants identified as White (77.6%), with others identifying as having a mixed ethnic background (5.6%), Asian (1.9%), Black (0.6%), other (2%), or they chose not to answer (missing: 13%). The majority identified as British (57.9%), followed by being from the United States (15.1%), Australia/New Zealand (10.7%), Canada (5.7%), Europe (7.5%), or other (3.1%) with a further number declining to respond (missing: 1.2%). Less than half the sample identified as being in a current relationship (39.8%), but over three-quarters had children (77%).

### Questionnaire and Analysis Strategy

The questionnaire was advertised as for any man who had experienced control and aggression from a female partner as the specific inclusion criteria, purposefully avoiding using the term "domestic violence" but being clear that was advertised for those who had been in opposite sex relationships. Exclusion criteria was any man who was describing experiences that had occurred with a male partner, but this was not seen in any responses. After the initial demographic questions, the majority of the questions were qualitative in nature, open-ended to allow participants to give information about their experiences and the context, in as much detail as they felt comfortable doing. The questions began by asking about the nature of the relationship generally (e.g., *Can you describe how your relationship is/was generally? How did it change over the course of the time you were together?*) and then moved in to ask about conflict and aggression (e.g., *Can you describe what happened when there was conflict in your relationship? and Did this ever escalate to physical aggression?*). These questions were structured to unpick general patterns of aggression and also ask about specific incidents to give examples.

The next part began to explore coercive control, including looking at the use of control of other relationships, financial matters, children (if applicable), and levels of independence. The Controlling Behavior Scale (Graham-Kevan & Archer, 2005) was also utilized to give examples of control (e.g., control the other's money), with participants being asked to describe if these items ever occurred in the relationship, as well as giving the opportunity to add additional examples.

Participants were then specifically asked about gaslighting; the item defined the behavior before asking if it has occurred: "Gaslighting is a form of manipulation where a person seeks to sow seeds of doubt, hoping to make their partner question their own memory, perception, and sanity. It includes using persistent denial, misdirection, contradiction, and lying, in attempts to destabilize their partner and their beliefs. Can you describe whether this occurred within your relationship at all?". At the end of the questionnaire, participants were given a full debrief and signposted to sources of support. There was some variety in the quantity of text given in responses by participant and by question; on the whole participants chose to write in detail about their experiences with very few using only short answers. As a consequence, the data were rich in detail for the analysis.

Thematic analysis was chosen as a useful way of identifying, analyzing, and reporting themes in qualitative data (Braun &

Clarke, 2006); specifically, a deductive analysis was chosen with a focus on semantic themes. After reading through the transcripts several times to become familiar with the content, the data were then coded by hand by identifying relevant parts that corresponded with each code. These codes were then transformed into potential themes by finding relevant extracts to evidence. Next, a review of the themes was undertaken, to ensure they related to the data and represented it well. Finally, extracts were chosen to represent themes to be used in reporting the research.

## Results and Discussion

The analysis of the data for this article was broadly separated into “aggression” and “coercive control” as the two master themes to be explored<sup>1</sup>; the main themes along with each subtheme can be seen listed in Table 1. Each theme will be discussed alongside the subthemes that were chosen and supported with reference to participant quotes.

### Main Theme 1: Aggression

**Subtheme 1a: Verbal aggression.** The men who took part in this survey were first asked about what conflict looked like within their relationship. Many described verbal aggression that included yelling, screaming, and shouting:

She would lose her temper and scream and shout, I would go and sit in another room and she would be banging on the door shouting through the door. (P79)

For some, this would last for an extended period in a bid to prompt a reaction of response:

She would get upset about something and after arguing for a couple hours, I would tell her I’m done and I’m going to bed and she would literally stand at the foot of the bed and keep arguing until I finally yelled back at her. (P54)

For a significant number of men, the verbal aggression was the antecedent to the development of something more serious. This escalation is reflected situationally, in that verbal aggression could develop into physical aggression within individual instances of conflict:

... with no explanation of what or why she was arguing ... following me about the house until there was reaction, then would name call and yell and swear before throwing things about the house or at me or attacking me with whatever was near. (P57)

Table 1  
*Main Themes and Subthemes From the Thematic Analysis*

Main theme	Subtheme
1. Aggression	1a) Verbal aggression 1b) Physical aggression 1c) Sexual aggression
2. Coercive control	2a) Control over personal freedom 2b) Manipulation and isolation 2c) Gaslighting 2d) Denigration and humiliation 2e) Fear and uncertainty

For others, the reflection on escalation was across the period of the relationship:

My ex-partner would become very aggressive verbally, this escalated during the relationship to slap and punch me. (P31)

Verbal aggression has not been fully explored in its own right, but research suggests that it often occurs in relationships that involve physical violence, but is also a possible cause of this aggression becoming physical (Schumacher & Leonard, 2005) through a continuum that exists in aggressive relationships (O’Leary, 1993).

Research suggests that where there is physical aggression, there is also verbal aggression and that the antecedents of both are similar (Straus & Sweet, 1992). Indeed, Stets (1990) posited this could reflect that they could share the same underlying constructs (aggressiveness), however the author felt alternatively it is more likely they have a different underlying foundation but that it is a two-step process where the physical builds on the verbal. Other research suggests they have the same genetic etiology (Saudino & Hines, 2007). This is likely to be the more appropriate explanation based on the differences that exist in nonintimate aggression; that is, men and women use verbal aggression at similar rates (Björkqvist, Österman, & Lagerspetz, 1994), but the sex difference for physical aggression is in the direction of men (Archer, 2004).

Verbal aggression has often been conflated within psychological or emotional aggression too; for example, on Tolman’s (1989) measure of psychological maltreatment of women, there is an item of what the Conflict Tactics Scale would construct as verbal aggression: “my partner yelled and screamed at me.” Regardless of where it is categorized, this behavior is impactful to those in and outside the relationship; research suggests that there is an impact of verbal aggression on children in the household. Specifically, Vissing, Straus, Gelles, and Harrop (1991) found children who witnessed it within the home (as compared with those who did not) exhibited more delinquency and physical aggression, across different ages and for both boys and girls.

**Subtheme 1b: Physical aggression.** A misconception about women’s violence toward men is often that it cannot be very impactful due to the differences that exist in size and strength (Saunders, 1988). The participants within this sample described a range of physically violent acts that included slapping and punching and also specific targeting of the genitals:

... throwing anything she could get her hands on from tv remotes to ornaments. I used to get punched, slapped and kicked as well. (P45)

I woke up in tremendous pain. ... My ex had pulled the bed covers off and punched me full force in the testicles. As I was gasping for air she hit me in the head with a boot. (P112)

For some men, this also included the use of a number of weapons:

Branded with an iron. Attacked with a hammer. (P22)

Broke her hand punching me to the rear of the head. ... Attempted to stab me with a kitchen knife. ... (P109)

For some women here, the fact they are typically not as physically strong as men is compensated for when using weapons, or target-

<sup>1</sup> Further analysis from this data set is presented in subsequent articles.

ing men in their most vulnerable areas. Although research suggests that women are more likely than men to be injured in IPV incidents (Archer, 2000), men are at an increased risk of being injured when there are knives, irons, and other weapons being used.

For many men these incidents occurred when they were most vulnerable, for example, when they were asleep:

The worst example was a night when she doused the bed in paraffin, set fire to it with me asleep, turned the power off and waited by the switch with a hammer. (P144)

She also had a habit of attacking me later when I was sleeping, which meant that sleep was hard as I couldn't relax at all. (P32)

For these men, the attacks would come when they were vulnerable and unprepared. The impact of this type of attack goes beyond physical injuries. It also left men on edge and fearing the next attack. Again, as women are typically not as physically strong as men, their strength is more than equalized if they choose to attack when their partner is completely unprepared.

Within the questionnaire, when asked about whether they had ever used physical aggression themselves toward a partner, 78% of men said they had not. When asked to explain, a strong theme within their responses was around a chivalrous and normative belief about not being physically violent to women:

I never retaliated as I don't hit women. (P23)

For some men, they recognized this was how they had been raised as boys:

I was raised never to hit a woman. Even in self-defense. (P29)

For some of the men, they chose not to defend themselves or retaliate through fear of the consequences both in terms of further violence and being able to defend against false allegations:

I was and am too afraid even to defend myself, I know that if I do and any injury occurs, there's no way I could prove self-defense. (P70)

No I didn't respond, because I was scared. (P113)

Much of the feminist literature indicates that women's aggression occurs as the act of self-defense (Saunders, 1986); but for men within the current sample, they experienced unprovoked violence, and the majority never retaliated. Traditional models of IPV hold that the majority of physical violence is committed by men against women and that when women utilize physical force, it is in retaliation and self-defense (Browne, 1987; Dobash & Dobash, 1979, 2004). The findings of this theme suggest that women are indeed violent toward their partners and that these attacks were often unprovoked, using objects and weapons, and when the men were more vulnerable. This adds to a growing body of literature that demonstrates that women can be violent to their male partners (Archer, 2000), that they can cause physical injuries (Hines & Douglas, 2010a), and that they can be the sole perpetrator, being motivated by something other than self-defense (Gray & Foshee, 1997). The findings that many men experienced violence when they were asleep could indicate women target men when they are more physically vulnerable. With differences in men's and women's size and strength, it could be seen as a less risky aggressive strategy; women's higher level of fear has been thought to be the

reason they do not tend to engage in nonintimate aggression at the same rates as men (Campbell, 2006), it could be that some women choose to act violently at a time they know the imbalance of strength is less.

Men's inhibition of unprovoked or retaliatory violence toward their female partners indicates a protective and chivalrous attitude in some cases; Felson (2002) asserts that norms of chivalry inhibit men's aggression to women and that this is taught from an early age where boys are told not to hit girls. Men inhibit their aggression toward their female partner compared with a same-sex other, whereas women increase their aggression toward a male partner (Bates et al., 2014). In hypothetical scenarios, where women's aggression is seen as increasing, this is a function of the target relationship, whereas men's diminution of aggression is a function of target sex (Cross, Tee, & Campbell, 2011). This finding also indicates that the men's experiences being described in this study are not part of a bidirectional or mutual pattern of IPV in the relationship.

**Subtheme 1c: Sexual aggression.** For men within this sample, there were several descriptions of sexual assault and instances of forced penetration:

She also subjected me to several ordeals of sexual torture . . . the first I knew about it was waking up to find myself handcuffed to the metal bedframe. She proceeded to torture me (insertion of vibrators into my anus, lots of small cuts with a craft knife, squeezing and hitting testicles) and then got infuriated because I was not getting an erection (obviously too terrified and in too much pain) and gave me a good punching and left me there. (P118)

The co-occurrence of physical IPV and sexual aggression has been documented within women's victimization literature (Wingood, DiClemente, & Raj, 2000), including the significant impact this has (Kilpatrick, Best, Saunders, & Veronen, 1988). Less is known about men's experience of sexual aggression from women, in intimate relationships, but that which exists suggests it can be part of a wider pattern of IPV. For example, Hines and Douglas (2016b) found that 28% of their male IPV help-seeking sample had experienced severe sexual aggression, and this was associated with poor mental and physical health outcomes. This has implications for men's support services, as many men who are forced to penetrate are often dealing with their experiences without help and support (Weare, 2017).

The stereotypes about women's size and strength as an inhibitor for being aggressive are also particularly strong within the area of sexual aggression; there are perceptions about men having a much stronger desire for sex, which creates a significant stigma around women's sexual aggression that impacts public perceptions (Weare, 2017). In addition, there are assumptions about physically not being able to be forced to have sex with a woman through inaccurate beliefs about the nature of men's arousal (Weare, 2018). Attributions and perception of male rape/sexual assault victims have suggested that rape myths are more likely to be accepted when the perpetrator was female compared with male (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 1992), male participants were more likely to blame victims if they were assaulted by someone of the sex they were attracted to (Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2006), and male rape victims tend to be blamed more than female victims in part due to the societal perceptions about a man being able to escape or stop the attack (Davies, Pollard, & Archer, 2001). Javaid

(2015) argued that rape myths (male and female) are rooted in expectations about gender roles; specifically, the idea of male rape may be disputed because men are socialized to be strong and powerful, and it provides a challenge to masculinity when this occurs.

## Main Theme 2: Coercive Control

**Subtheme 2a: Control over personal freedom.** For many of the participants, their female partners used tactics of coercive control to limit their personal freedom. This was seen through different mechanisms but included use of mobile phones, social activities, and work life. For example,

She had to know everything thing I did at work. She'd pester me until I told her. There were no activities without her. (P11)

My phone was monitored, phone calls listened in to. I was constantly questioned where I was going or had been. (P28)

This behavior also had a significant impact on the men in terms of escalation to physical aggression as a consequence of noncompliance:

If I was out with work colleagues for social events she would continually call or message, sometimes up to 40 times in the space of a few hours. She had to know who I was with and where I was or what time I would be home. If I didn't arrive at that time she would go crazy and scream, swear and shout or attack me, lashing out and slapping me or clawing me. (P57)

For some, this control of freedom extended to financial areas where women controlled all the money:

She had control of my wages and gave me £20 per week from them. (P3)

I'd have to bring proof of purchase for milk when she would send me to the shops and ring her when in the shops to prove that I was there and only there. (P121)

Coercive control can manifest in several different ways, and this level of control in day-to-day life is not only damaging to the relationships and activities outside the relationship but is also likely to impact on the individual and how they feel about themselves (Marshall, 1996). Victims often lose their agency and autonomy in a bid to consider their abuser's behavior and respond in a protective or defensive way (Williamson, 2010). This sort of monitoring of communications has been seen in the literature previously (Southworth, Finn, Dawson, Fraser, & Tucker, 2007), as well as the way IPV has directly impacted on activities such as employment (Wettersten et al., 2004). Stark (2007) discussed women who attempt to "forge moments of autonomy" (p. 205) but in a fearful way in case the abusive man invades this and there is a reprisal.

One way in which the men experienced this control of freedom in the current sample was through money; economic and financial abuse has also been seen within the IPV literature. As a tool of coercive control, it is thought to be used to keep the victim dependent on the abuser (Smith & Powell, 1989). Economic abuse is seen within the Duluth "Power and Control wheel" (Pence & Paymar, 1993), and although historically this would be more likely to be a tool that men used against women, there is evidence within

this sample that it was a tool women used toward their male partners. It links with the comments about this within this wider theme; controlling social activities and relationships, as well as finances, had a goal of creating dependence.

**Subtheme 2b: Manipulation and isolation.** Men described multiple ways in which their female partners would use manipulation to attempt to influence their perceptions or behavior. One such example was through the use of the children; this included threats to hurt them and using them within the conflict situation:

Used son, even before he was born, against me to control my behavior. Said she knew he was the only thing I truly loved and would use him to get me to do what she wanted, that she'd never let me see him if I left her. (P89)

Threatened to slit her throat and daughters if I didn't come back. (P152)

For men who are fathers, use of their children was a powerful tool and was indeed a significant factor that kept them in abusive relationships. Fear of losing contact with their children has been the most common reason cited for not leaving a relationship (Hines & Douglas, 2010a).

Another tool of manipulation was false allegations—both the threat of, and the actual use of:

I have never attacked her or fought back at all. I have tried to restrain her at times to prevent her from attacking me . . . she would then show me bruises a couple of days later and tell me that she could report me to the police for assault and that they would believe her story. (P120)

. . . she used false allegations of child abuse to have me removed by family court from my children's lives for around the 5 months it took to have the allegations shown to be baseless, and this aided her alienating efforts. (P117)

The use of false allegations fits with what Tilbrook et al. (2010) have labeled legal and administrative aggression: a tendency for women to manipulate a legal or service system to the detriment of their partner. Making false accusations (e.g., of IPV or child abuse) can have a devastating impact on men and their well-being and also impacts on relationships with their children through mechanisms like parental alienation (Gardner, 2002). The threat of false allegations and an awareness of the gendered stereotypes that exist within the service system would be likely to coerce a man into changing his behavior to avoid the consequences.

Manipulating behavior was also seen through the use of sex. As described earlier, there was sexual aggression seen within some men's accounts, but for others, sex and reproduction became a tool that women would use to coerce:

At a work meeting I opened my diary and she had placed a letter in it stating that she was pregnant and had come off the pill deliberately. . . . I felt totally violated. (P59)

I finished the relationship . . . she told me she was pregnant. So I said we'd have to give it another shot, three weeks later she told me she miscarried and then a month later she was actually pregnant with my first. I've since found out from her friends at the time and confirmed by her, she was never pregnant she got her friend at the time to pee on the stick who I remember being there at the time, and the blood on the floor of the bathroom when she "miscarried" was a period with tissue paper in it. (P133)

Pregnancy coercion has been explored within women's victimization and involves coercion to become pregnant, as well as sabotaging contraception and birth control methods. Miller et al. (2010) found this occurred in 25% of their sample who reported other forms of IPV. This has been much less explored within men's experiences, but it is clear from the accounts within this data that both types of pregnancy or reproductive control were present. Along with these other forms of manipulation, it is a way or coercing and influencing behaviors and perceptions of men to achieve their partners' desired goal—whether it be pregnancy, keeping their partner in the relationship, or disrupting the parental relationship.

One of the most well-known coercive control tactics that has been seen in the IPV literature is often around controlling the relationships external to the partnership (Marshall, 1996). Manipulation of these relationships often results in men becoming more isolated as they lose their social support network. This manipulation occurred in different ways for different participants, for example, for some of the men it would be through direct contact or interference:

She controlled my friendships and controlled my contact with my family as best she could. This would include logging onto my emails and sending emails to my family pretending to be me. (P2)

Whereas for others, it was done more through indirect means such as emotional blackmail, or through feelings of fear:

I have no friends now, my wife insisted I stop socialising as I was now with her and if I loved her I would not want to spend time with anyone else. (P41)

I was afraid to go spend time with friends because I didn't know what kind of minefield I'd be walking into when I got back home. (P20)

The co-occurrence of coercive control and physical aggression impacts the outcomes for victims as we know from the women's literature; indeed, it is thought that women are less likely to try and challenge incidences of coercive control when there is the threat of physical aggression (Shepard & Campbell, 1992). The presence of this theme is in contrast to assertions that men do not consider their physical violence victimization to be threatening (Nybergh et al., 2016). Although this behavior may start as seemingly innocuous, and not seem harmful to the men experiencing it, it often escalates and leaves men feeling disempowered, isolated, and vulnerable.

**Subtheme 2c: Gaslighting.** As a term, gaslighting originates from the 1944 film *Gaslight* that saw the main character manipulate his wife's environment in a way to destabilize her and cause her to question her own memory and beliefs (Gass & Nichols, 1988). Gaslighting has previously been linked to IPV through analysis of women's accounts (Guerin & de Oliveira Ortolan, 2017) but has not been explored within men's experiences. Within this sample, many of the men recognized the behavior but had not previously named it as such:

Yes, I didn't know that was a real thing, and didn't know it was called gas lighting, but it describes exactly what she did - that's the nail on the head there. (P48)

Indeed, others also alluded to their experiences of it and how they started to doubt their perceptions:

... I ended up essentially a wreck, not trusting my own memory or interpretation of events, constantly uncertain of myself and quite what was 'real' or not. (P116)

For some of the men in the sample, they started using tools to combat their experiences and reassure themselves:

At one point I started carrying a digital dictaphone hidden in my pocket to record things that were said, because she would deny saying things. I kind of thought it was me, so I spent some weeks just recording our conversations and sitting in my office playing them back, just to reassure myself I was not imagining things. (P41)

For one participant, he identified that it was part of the wider pattern of coercive control, and indeed linked it to his isolation from other relationships:

This was part of the control. When you only hear one voice it dominates. (P23)

Marshall (1999) discussed "subtle" uses of psychological abuse that are less observable; as a consequence of this intangibility, she suggested that it is more likely to harm a woman's sense of self and her well-being, which then in turn can impact on her relationships with others and her attitudes, and be much more pervasive than physical aggression (Marshall, 1996). It is likely that this is having a similar effect here on the men in this study; their perception of self was affected, leading them to change their behavior (e.g., keeping a diary) to try and be able to trust their version of events. The impact of relegating your own reality and taking on that of your partner's can have a severe impact on a person's well-being and sense of self (Williamson, 2010).

**Subtheme 2d: Denigration and humiliation.** For some of the men, their experiences of verbal aggression turned into something more controlling in the use of name calling, belittling, and demeaning them:

The verbal abuse would go from name calling, to making fun of my looks, to insulting my friends, to telling me our child wasn't mine. (P9)

She wouldn't let me sleep—it was torture, she would stand over my bed at night and say nasty things and I would have to get up early for work. (P26)

Despite these not always occurring in the context of raised voices and shouting, the humiliation was either public or meant to be an attack on their self-esteem or confidence:

... little things like criticism and jealousy became more common place until the point of being told how unimportant I was. (P50)

... partner started to become slightly controlling, mean, undermining and criticizing of both me and my friends. It was very subtle and occasional at first so I ignored it. It however developed to the point that I would feel anxious just before my girlfriend come home from work each day. (P139)

Feeling humiliated and degraded in this way can be one of the most impactful forms of coercive control; Follingstad et al. (1990) found this type of abuse was reported by the highest number of participants as the most impactful in their sample of battered women. The authors posit this may be because it directly impacts on the women's sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Although

some behavior could be attributed to the partner and so external from themselves (e.g., jealousy), other behaviors can target the self and so are more likely to be internally attributed and be more impactful (e.g., ridicule and denigration; Sackett & Saunders, 1999).

**Subtheme 2e: Fear and uncertainty.** Some of the men in the sample reflected on the way the abuse and coercive control manifested in the relationship, both in terms of its development but also its unpredictability.

It is so obvious now with hindsight what she was doing, but it was gradual you see and like the frog warmed up gently in the pan you do not see the abuse of the relationship creeping up and taking over you. (P14)

This participant reflected on the nature of how the abuse started, that it was not something that he was aware of at the time but that was clear when reflecting back on the behavior.

For others, they were reflecting back on how it felt to live with the abuse on a day-to-day basis, and the uncertainty this created:

. . . it was like walking on eggshells and she would just snap without warning and shout at me. (P46)

giving me the silent treatment for weeks on end. (P68)

One participant commented that this aspect of the abuse was more difficult to deal with compared with the physical violence:

At the beginning of the relationship she would become violent. After about five years the physical violence went away and the emotional rollercoaster was a lot worse. (P86)

It was evident from these men's accounts that the unpredictability of their partner was one of the most difficult aspects to cope with. Taylor, Magnussen, and Amundson (2001) described accounts of battered women and the unpredictability that creates an environment where the victim constantly worries what will happen next, and a need to attend to their own behavior in order to anticipate what will happen next. Indeed, this links with "hypervigilance," which is one of Walker's (1980) suggested symptoms of "battered woman syndrome": women become hypervigilant at preempting and predicting an attack. Coercive control is more difficult to address, as it is harder to evidence, and many of the behaviors in isolation may seem inconsequential, yet it is the pattern and persistence of them that become impactful (Williamson, 2010).

## Implications for Research and Practice

The results of this study indicate that men are experiencing a wide range of verbal, physical, and sexual aggression, and significant and severe incidents of coercive control. Although the literature has detailed incidents of the above previously, this is one of the more in-depth considerations of these experiences utilizing methodology to facilitate men in their disclosure. The findings provide support for previous literature that demonstrates the prevalence and severity of the verbal and physical aggression men experience (Hines et al., 2007), and also that men experience sexual aggression and can be forced into sex against their will (Weare, 2017). It furthers supports research that demonstrates men experience coercive control (Drijber et al., 2013) and provides supporting evidence for women's use of

legal and administrative aggression through false allegations (Hines & Douglas, 2010b).

The findings also contribute new understandings. Gaslighting had only previously been considered as a tool that men use to undermine and coercive control women (Guerin & de Oliveira Ortolan, 2017). The current study indicates that a significant number of men within this sample had described incidents of this, and these were often experiences they only fully understood once they left the relationship. Indeed, another contribution this study makes is the understanding of the extent of coercive control that men were experiencing. Men within this study described experiences of living in fear and "walking on eggshells" and reported that this aspect of their abusive experiences was often more impactful than the physical violence. From these experiences, there are a number of men who had experienced abuse from women, who would be likely to fit within Johnson's (1995, 2006) "intimate terrorist" group; that is, the partners of these men were perpetrating physical aggression and coercively controlling behavior. Johnson distinguished between the use of aggression in conflict, but not as a strategy of control (situation couple violence), and those where the physical violence is part of a wider pattern of control and domination. While Johnson supported the contention that women can be violent and controlling, he posited that the perpetrators in this "intimate terrorist" group are overwhelmingly men; however, this is a contention not supported by empirical tests (Bates et al., 2014). Indeed, Björkqvist (1994) suggested that there is no evidence to suggest women are less likely to engage in conflict than men, but by being typically not as physically strong as men, they are more likely to find nonphysical alternative means to do so, such as coercive control and indirect means.

Although some proponents of the gendered model of IPV hold that women's violence toward men is in self-defense, and not impactful (Saunders, 1988), the findings of the current study do not support this. Men in this study described serious physical violence and coercively controlling behavior that impacted on their day to day lives.<sup>2</sup> Crime figures and crime surveys suggest that the victims of IPV are overwhelmingly women; however these are likely underestimates because many men do not report their experiences. Within the current sample, 25.6% of the men had never told anyone about their experiences; where men had spoken about it, they had more often told friends and family, but not sought help from the police or services. This is a finding seen within the literature with men often feeling unable to ask for help for IPV (Tsui, 2014) or finding formal sources of support to be unhelpful (Machado et al., 2016). Although many victims of IPV regardless of gender will face barriers in help-seeking, it is thought that men face additional issues in relation to a gendered legal and service system and their own ability to ask for help. Men often do not report their experience for fear of not being taken seriously, feelings of shame, and the perception that formal services are not able to help (Drijber et al., 2013). This lack of reporting could also be seen as a product of chivalrous attitudes; men

<sup>2</sup> A full discussion of the impact of these experiences, along with barriers to help-seeking, can be found in a second article (Bates, 2018).

have been seen to show protective attitudes toward their partners, something which could be rooted in social values and culture (Entilli & Cipolletta, 2017) and could be a factor in not disclosing.

In addition, through socialization processes, men struggle to help-seek in a variety of settings (e.g., health; Addis & Mahalik, 2003), thought to be attributable to some extent to the way we construct masculinity as a culture. Masculine norms dictate that men are self-reliant and stoic, and some men who identify with these dominant masculine narratives may view help-seeking as in contrast with these values (Vogel, Heimerdinger-Edwards, Hammer, & Hubbard, 2011), and indeed the importance of maintaining a sense of masculinity has been found in the narrative accounts of male victims of IPV (Hogan, 2016). However, public perceptions of IPV are influenced by normative perceptions of masculinity and femininity; men are seen to deviate from the normative understanding of masculinity when they perpetrate aggression toward a woman, but also when they are victim of it (Scarduzio, Carlyle, Harris, & Savage, 2017). These perceptions may go some way to explaining why men struggle to identify as victims, which in turn influences help-seeking behavior (Machado et al., 2016). This has implications for awareness raising campaigns that need to capture the full range of people who experience IPV; men need to be “visible” in this way for them to begin to recognize and identify their experience. There is also a need for services (e.g., police and health services) to understand these gender specific barriers and to try and ensure their services are accessible.

This study is not without limitations. The sample was intended as a British sample but captured experiences from beyond, and that being said, it still represents a majority Western sample. Sex differences in aggression, specifically IPV, vary across cultures that hold more traditional values; cultures that have more gender equality in terms of societal power tend to have the most parity in IPV perpetration and higher absolute rates perpetrated by women (Archer, 2006). It is possible that a more culturally varied sample would have reflected different or more diverse findings. Furthermore, the anonymous online questionnaire was utilized to explore the experiences of men who were unlikely to either identify themselves as IPV victims (as a recruitment strategy) and were not from a help-seeking sample. This is likely to have captured a broader range of experience but is still to some extent self-selecting; there will still be men who do not feel able to take part in this type of research or indeed discuss their victimization at all, so this remains uncaptured. Finally, there are data missing about validity criteria and coder agreement for this study, and this is due to the single-author paper and lack of any further coders within the analysis.

Current IPV interventions continue to have a strong feminist influence within service provision, both in terms of perpetrator and victim services. This inevitably means the majority of the financial investment goes to funding services that address men's perpetration and support female victims. This creates a system where victim services appear to be gendered and only available or appropriate for women, which further reinforces societal stereotypes about the nature of IPV. There is a need to make services more visible for men, to encourage them to come forward and report their experiences. With the findings of the current study (and within the wider literature) indicating that men experience IPV at significant rates and severity, there is a need for policy and funding

to reflect men's increasing needs as victims (Bates et al., 2017). Current practice within victim support is focused almost exclusively on women, but this leaves a substantial number of men without help or support.

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